

# **We are never ever ever getting back together**

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

-----

As I've now reviewed all the Amiga games on the planet and it's scorching hot outside in the middle of summer, I thought today we'd take a look at 'The Snowman' for the Spectrum, Commodore 64 and MSX.

Based on the picture book by Raymond Briggs published in 1978, the game of the same name followed in 1984, developed by David Shea for the Spectrum, and converted for the Commodore 64 by Robert Harris. Both were published by Quicksilver Ltd, sharing largely indistinguishable design structure, platform-driven mechanics, and graphics.

In-between, using the traditional cel method, Raymond's book was transformed into an animated cartoon, which debuted on Channel 4 on Boxing Day 1982, thrusting his poignant lesson in the joy and loss of friendship into the limelight of mainstream awareness. In each medium, a

similar story is conveyed in a quaintly word-free manner, instantly lending it empathetic, universal appeal.



David's game operates on the same visually-oriented level... kind of. Digitised speech wasn't really the norm back in the mid-eighties, and text is kept to a bare minimum beyond the instructions screen. If you're not a fan of the rotund, red-suited beardy one, you'll be glad to know that - much like the book - Santa doesn't make an appearance. His addition in the cartoon was the brainwave of the animators, and initially deemed "awfully corny" by Raymond. He soon had a change of heart upon seeing the convincing way in which he was woven into the fabric of the boy's enchanting encounter. I

doubt the fleetingly proposed rabbit's tea party would have been such an easy sell!

Briefly (the animated short was only 26 minutes long after all), an originally unnamed boy builds a snowman during the Christmas holiday, it's brought to life by - I don't know, let's say pixie dust and Marshmallow Fluff - and the pair immediately strike up a charming brotherly bond.

James (he was given a name by animator Joanna Harrison for his TV adaptation) and the snowman (who wasn't) play nicely together like siblings who don't even want to throttle each other a *little* bit, soar through the sky visiting the local Brighton landmarks and even meet Father Christmas who presents James with a *scarf* (plot device anvil, alert, alert, pay attention!). Joanna later married her boyfriend, James, and lived happily ever after. See, every detail is significant, making it all the more rewarding to analyse. Even the number plate of the motorbike on which James and the snowman joyride through the woods is relevant; HJK 596 being the initials of Hilary Audus (maybe her maiden name began with a K?), followed by the number of the house in which she lived at the time.

Weary from his implausible adventure, James goes to sleep that night, only to wake the following morning to discover that the cruel sun has melted his new pal into a coal-buttoned Slush Puppy sporting a fisherman's wax cotton hat. A flavourless, colourless one no less. Where's the fun in that?

For 1.37 seconds James and the audience wonder if it was all merely a vivid dream, a flight of fancy you could say. Then. Then! Get this! He reaches into the pocket of his PJ bottoms and whips out the crucial scarf, signalling that he *hadn't* imagined it all!

Daddy Christmas is real... oh, but so too is the Circle of Life, and *death*. Then we realise how wonderful life is when Elton John is in the world. We don't know anything about taxes yet since we're only about eight years old and have that rapture to come.

We're left shaken by the schizophrenic dichotomy of love and laughter, trauma and bereavement, and wonder what the point of it all may be. In that moment we witness the end of childhood innocence and the transition to adulthood... and our introduction to therapy and Fluvoxamine.

Still, for a while there we were "walking in the air, floating in the moonlit sky, the people far below sleeping as we fly"... and we'll always have Brighton, and the North Pole.

In the UK at least, the nation embraced the classic tale and every member of the public born after 1982 has watched it at least as many times as they've had Christmases. Evidence for this is aptly demonstrated by regular TV polls to establish the most tearjerky, heartstring-tugging festive highlights of all time. In a UKTV Gold census it was voted number 4 in a chart of 'Greatest TV Christmas Moments', and 3rd in Channel 4's 2004 rundown of the '100 Greatest Christmas Moments'.

As for the book, that was declared runner up for 1979 CILIP Carnegie & Kate Greenaway Children's Book Award Medal in recognition of its touching illustrations. Well, it wasn't going to get anywhere based on the *text*, was it! Incidentally, it was pipped to the post by Janet and Allan Ahlberg's 'Each Peach Pear Plum', an interactive picture book that encourages very young children to play 'spot the famous fairy-tale or nursery rhyme character'.

In 1982 the hand-drawn animated adaptation was nominated for an Academy Award in the 'Best Animated Short Film' category, though again failed to take home the spoils.

Winning that year was Zbigniew Rybczynski's 'Tango', an 8 minute, Polish - yet English *language* - entry. It's an avant-garde animated film revolving around characters who enter a single room, do stuff and then leave again without acknowledging each other's existence. It's experimental.  
\*shrug\*

Nevertheless, The Snowman *was* finally recognised by BAFTA in 1983 who awarded it that year's winner in the best children's entertainment/drama programme division. In the same year it was also nominated for a BAFTA for best television craft/graphics, though ultimately Graham McCallum won for his work on Jane/Gulliver In Lilliput. Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift requires no elucidation. Jane is a risqué, animated interpretation of the morale-boosting wartime Daily Mirror newspaper comic strip of the same name. It stars a number of scantily clad women whose clothes inexplicably fall off given the most nebulous opportunity. All a bit embarrassing really, unless you consider the Carry On movies highbrow art.

There's a game based on The Snowman, did I mention that? Well, very *loosely* based on it anyhow. You play as James we have to assume, your objective being to navigate the single-screen levels collecting piles of snow and other snowman-construction paraphernalia and drop them in a designated spot to assemble your frosty buddy one piece at a time. Like Burger Time in a freezer then, erm, without the beef.

"The game is attractive and is a change from the violence of Space Invaders and the like. The Snowman, from Quicksilver, combines the best of many games already on the market."

**80% - Sinclair User issue 25 (April 1984)**



© Quicksilver 1983

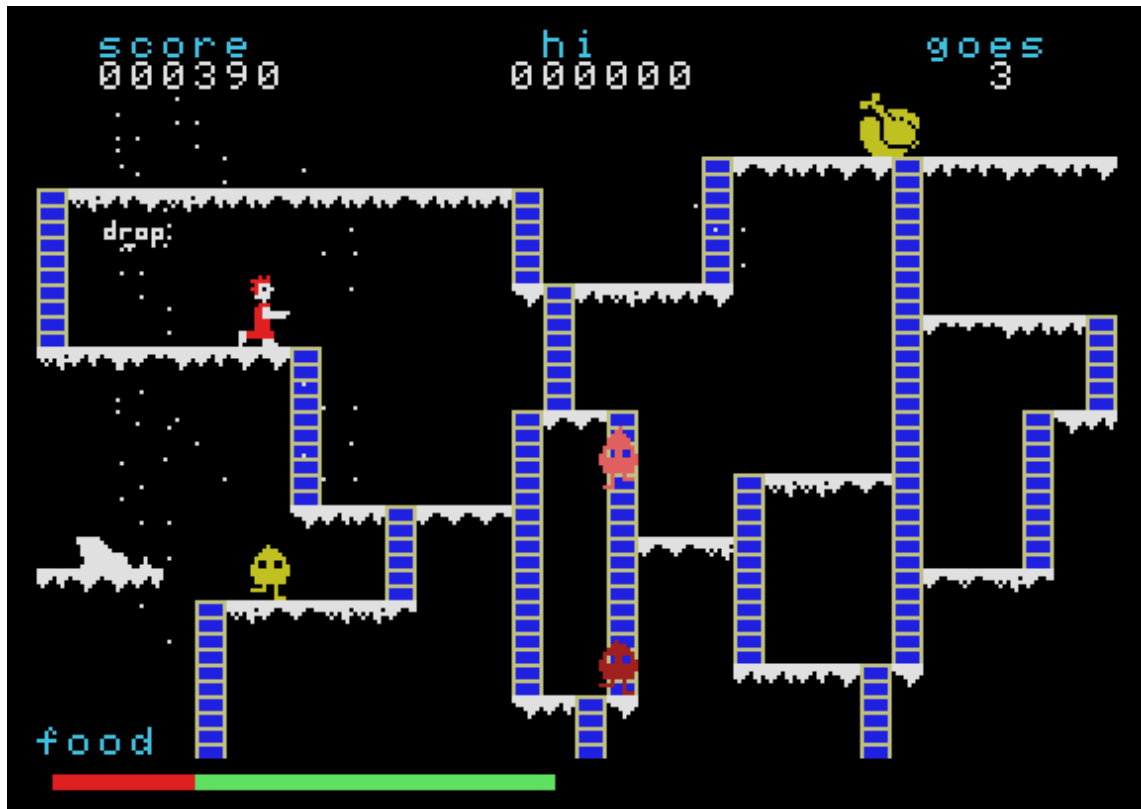
Moving between platforms using the 'ladders', you must avoid contact with any dancing gas flames as they'll melt your snow parcels, sabotaging the delicate operation. Fret not - it will reappear elsewhere so all is not lost; the white fluffy powder is never in short supply. How else are you expected to fly without wings?

Raymond's classic, heartwarming winter tale being as nonviolent as you could possibly imagine, naturally our protagonist doesn't enter the combat zone armed with a weapon as such. As a consolation prize, we equip ourselves with ice lollies, allowing us to temporarily freeze the blistering hot flames into inanimate, benign blocks, making our task far less troublesome. As if that wasn't enough of an incentive, these, as well as other collectables such as Christmas trees and crackers, presents, and stockings serve to ratchet up our score.

"Despite the control problems, The Snowman turns out to be a frustratingly addictive game. Good!"

## 78% - Crash issue 03 (April 1984)

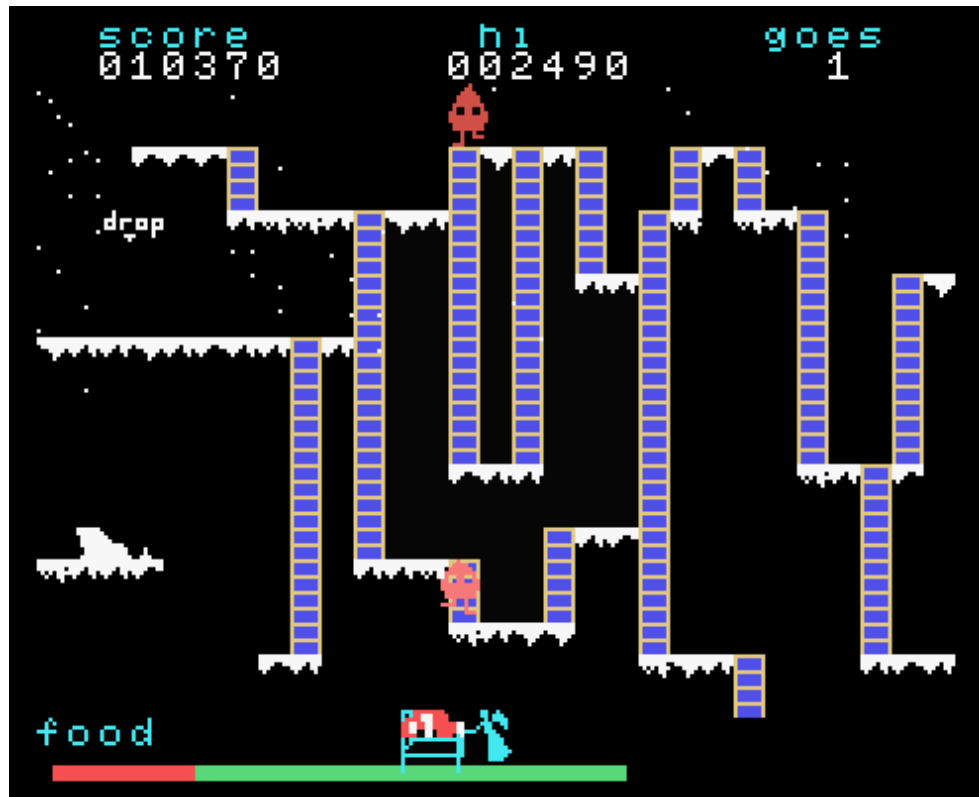
A key difference with the MSX incarnation is the ability to hang beneath platforms like a monkey using the fire button. Once the threat has passed, releasing it causes James to haul himself back up onto terra firma. As such, the lack of firepower isn't so much of an encumbrance.





Three more stages follow sharing the same premise, albeit with one additional variety of opponent to shimmy your way around. On level two 'sleep monsters' are your new nemesis; should you collide with them you'll be knocked clear from your perch into a conveniently aligned bed at the base of the screen causing you to lose a 'go'. In MSXland our 'death' is a slightly more elaborate affair - we flutter down the screen, floating from side to side like a feather while an angel tracks our movements, maneuvering a bed beneath us to break our fall.



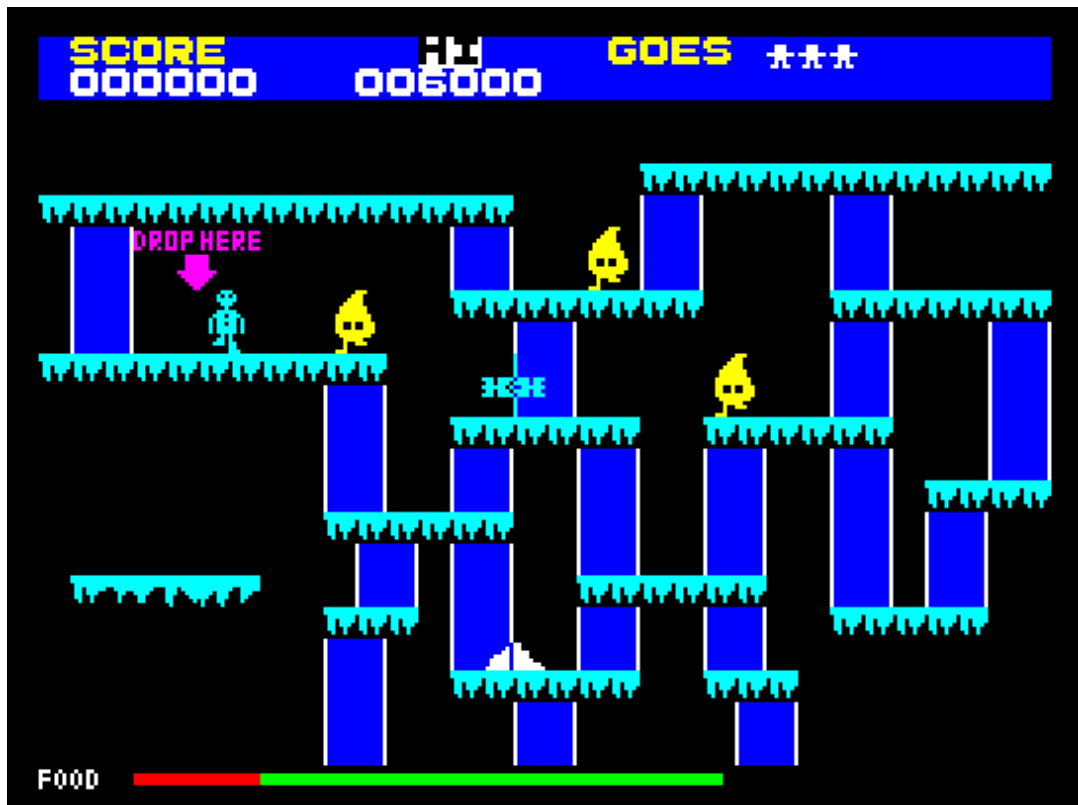


In either case, rather than the typical life system, we are furnished with a number of 'goes', possibly because the coder didn't want there to be any undue emphasis placed on existential nihilism, obviously. Hadn't we been traumatised enough by this juncture? Gone are the ice lollies; on *this* level, alarm clocks are your ally, warding off deep slumber by temporarily incarcerating the sleep monsters. Wherever this place is where your biggest fear is slipping into a gentle siesta, I want to emigrate there now.

Level three represents more of the same, only the snowman accessories you must retrieve are switched. From more orthodox kit such as eyes, buttons, a fruity nose, hat, smile and scarf, now we really get to push the boat out, decorating him with a torch, skateboard, tie, glasses, trousers and balloons. Whatever next, a Raleigh Chopper and Spacehopper?

Level four applies a slightly fresh(ish) spin to the tried and tested gameplay in that we're now required to collect six ice cubes to prevent our festive sculpture from melting into a puddle, whilst the flames are back with a vengeance to harangue us. As in the first level these can't harm us, since we're wearing fire retardant pyjamas. That's *my* theory anyway.

As you attempt to construct and preserve him, your energy bar continuously ebbs away until it hits rock bottom, as do you, luckily cushioned by your bed. Nonetheless, staving off hunger by munching on Christmas pudding or turkey will keep you on your feet and wide awake long enough to complete your chilly magnum opus. Ironically the mirror opposite effect Christmas dinner would typically have on the average person, prone to slipping into a coma for several hours, waking just in time to gobble down multiple turkey and stuffing butties for supper, before nodding off again. I suspect it's not the Yuletide edible delicacies keeping James awake at all. \*nudge, wink, sniff\*



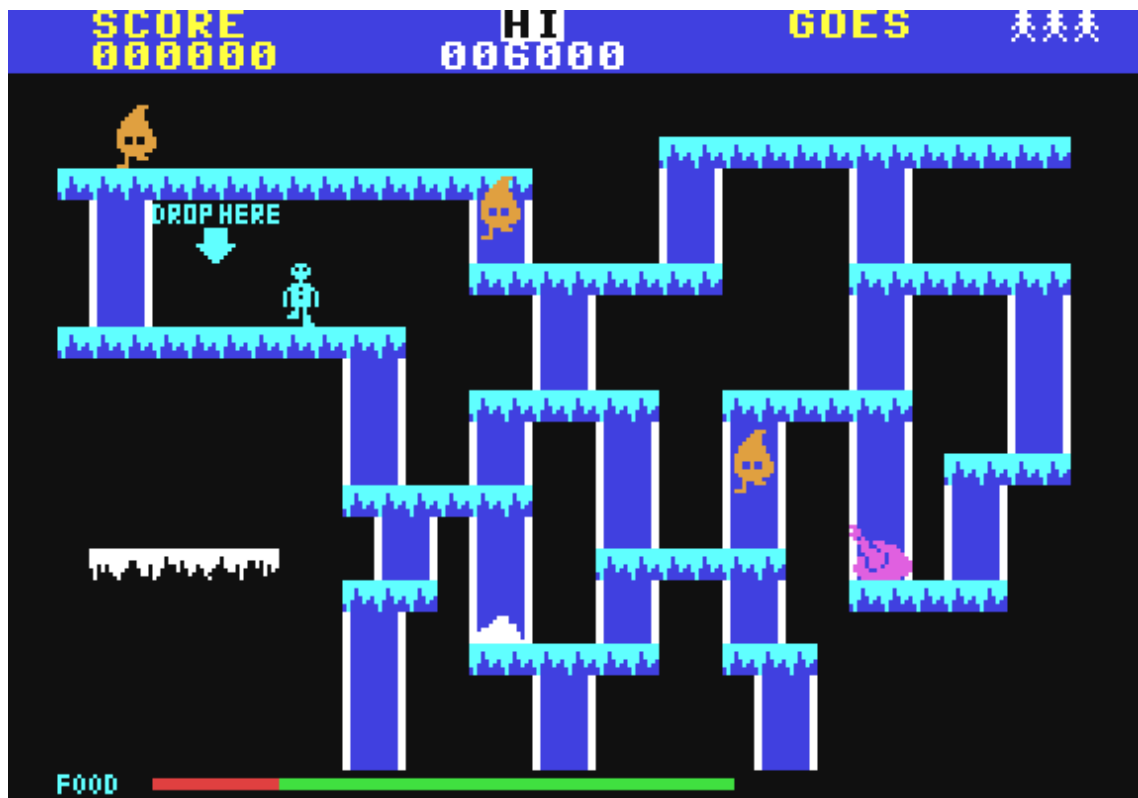
Ah, controls, *they* should be pretty tight and responsive in a quick-fire platformer, right? They're *not*, sadly. Pixel perfect precision is demanded when it comes to mounting ladders/teleport tubes/whatever they are, as well as when disembarking. If you're not perfectly aligned with a floor-switching wotsit/slide there's no way you're getting up or down it, or stepping off onto a ledge. If they span multiple floors you'll sail right by as though you hadn't shifted the joystick to either side at all.

"I liked this game a lot. The graphics are great - and the title screen's got a wonderful picture of the snowman to look at while the game loads. It's very playable, although I often found control quite difficult. The character has to be perfectly central in the columns before he can move.

If, like me, you're one of those who can't stop singing "We're walking in the air...", the theme tune from the film, all day then you'll love this."

## 87% - Computer and Video Games (April 1984)

Given that the cartoon only features a single recognisable audio track - 'Walking in the Air' - you'd expect the choice of in-game music to be a no-brainer. Nope, it's 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer', the jingle that emanated from a colouring book devised for a promotional event at the department chain store, Montgomery Ward. It's certainly not royalty-free music so that doesn't explain the switch. In the MSX version, a medley of Christmas carols can be identified, yet still, no air-walking shenanigans are afoot. That was saved for the C64's superior SID chip.





David Shea went on to work as a programmer for Microprose where he contributed towards Silent Service II, Knights of the Sky and Railroad Tycoon for the Amiga/Atari ST. He subsequently joined Mindscape who were later absorbed by Acclaim, where he remained having been promoted to lead programmer. There he assisted in coding the Amiga version of Battletoads, The Incredible Hulk for the SEGA Mega Drive, and Batman & Robin and Alien Trilogy for the PlayStation following Acclaim's takeover of Probe.

Having left his most recent role as a Software Engineer at Imagus in Brisbane, David is now travelling the east coast of Australia, while continuing to develop iOS software for his own company, Big Or Small Apps.

25 years on, 2009 ushered in the release of a charming contemporary resurrection of this obscure little title courtesy of Tardis Remakes. It's available for Windows and OSX, introduces a limited quantity of snowballs as projectile

weapons, whilst incorporating enhanced controls and a 'Frosty the Snowman' theme tune. Isn't throwing snow-flesh somewhat disrespectful to snowmen? I doubt *that* would be signed off by HR, or should that be SR?



Unlike the alternative US version of the cartoon, David Bowie *didn't* offer to narrate the introduction of Tardis Remake's Snowman game, posing as an adult James reminiscing on the true life events of that spellbinding Christmas night from his distant boyhood. In a similar vein, having passed away last year, his involvement in any future anniversary re-releases of the animated short is likely to be minimal... call it intuition if you like.



In 2012 producer John Coates died of cancer at the age of 84 in the same year the sequel - The Snowman and the Snowdog - was released. It's dedicated to his loving memory.

Peter Auty, the chorister who sang the Snowman theme song at age 13, yet was somehow missed off the credits roll call in the original release, thankfully is still going strong. He's now an opera singer performing on stage all round the globe. I couldn't tell you if he swims across the frozen sky, riding in the midnight blue to arrive at his gigs. A conventional plane may be more practical these days unless he's travelling really light.

83-year-old Raymond Briggs CBE - multi-award-winning illustrator, cartoonist, and graphic novelist - is still plodding along as grumpily as ever. His first wife fell victim to

"schizophrenia combined with leukaemia", he lost his second following a protracted battle with Parkinson's disease, his mother died as a result of dementia and his dad was stolen away by cancer, so Raymond has no doubt earned the right to be a bit cheesed off with life. He's now working on what he expects to be his final book; it's all about growing old and dying. It's a good job this isn't my feel-good Christmas special!

Last year Raymond was recognised by the charity BookTrust with a lifetime achievement award for his contribution to children's literature, and despite being inextricably entwined with festive cheer, his disdain for Christmas hasn't waned one iota.

"I don't like Christmas at all, I don't think anybody does. It's full of anxiety, 'Have I got enough, have I spent enough, have I spent so much, we had so and so last year so we have to have so and so this year,' I can't bear it really. I get letters from people all the time saying 'We agree with you'."

Sadly, Dianne Jackson, director of the animated short, was struck down on New Year's Eve 1992 at the tender age of 51 having succumbed to her battle with cancer. Of course, this meant she wouldn't get the opportunity to celebrate the release of the 20th-anniversary edition featuring yet another alternative introduction, this time from Santa Claus himself, narrated by comedian Mel Smith who died of a heart attack in 2013.

Each year I re-watch this wistful, fragmented snapshot of the departed cast and crew's legacy, I do so in the sanguine belief that I'm helping to keep their memory alive. So here's to the next 35 years of time-honoured re-runs, one of the select few we *won't* be lamenting this Christmas.